Faith and Health
Acts 3:1-16
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You and I didn't see it happen. We weren't there. We have no way to prove that it happened. In fact, there is very little in our experience which allows for this kind of thing.

Peter and John were leaving the Temple. As usual, they confronted the pathetic crowd of beggars, lepers, cripples that gathered there to appeal to the pious when their defenses were down. One of them, a man crippled all his life - a man so utterly dependent he had to rely on others to carry him to the Temple gate in order to beg, asked for money. He was not alone: we have to imagine a whole crowd of sick, emaciated people crying out for alms. For some reason, however, this man caught the attention of the two apostles. Peter said: "We have no money: but we will give you what we do have. In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you to walk." Whereupon the man jumped up, leaping, shouting and followed them to another part of the Temple complex. A crowd had gathered and Peter chose the occasion to deliver a ringing testimony to the power and authority of Jesus Christ. "It was the power of his name that gave strength to this man. What you see and know was done by faith in his name: it was faith in Jesus that made him well like this before you all." [Acts 3: 16 TEV]

First - some "soundings". It was an age in which the miraculous was commonplace. People were surprised, to be sure, when the lame man walked. And yet the records of the era tell of many miracles and many "healers". More significant to them than the restoration to health, was the fact that it was done in the name of Jesus Christ. We cannot afford to go too deeply at this point, but it is helpful to understand that the age accepted the premise that all disease, all infirmity was caused by demons, or evil spirits. The way to healing there was the defeat of the demonic by a greater power. William Barclay [The Mind of Christ] points out that believing in evil spirits has two implications for faith and health. First of all, if you are convinced that disease is the result of demons, you may begin to display physical symptoms of the disease if you are convinced you have a demon.

Second, if disease actually resulted from this mentality - and at this point the question of whether or not there are demons is irrelevant - you well may be cured or healed if you are convinced that your demon has been driven away by a higher authority or power.

Now we can't push that too far, but I did read recently that 90% of the participants in a British survey of first-time fathers, testified that they suffered the symptoms right along with their pregnant wives. And I do know that when one of my family suffers stomach flu, several others of us begin to imagine the initial symptoms. That is the first sounding.

The second is that one of the characteristics of the earliest Christian witness was healing. Jesus saw his mission in terms of "teaching, preaching and healing." He did all three - simultaneously: they were part of one mission. Part of this, however, is our inclination to universalize or absolutize that understanding. The fact is that Jesus, and his apostles, did not heal everyone. St. Paul had a physical affliction that he begged God to remove, apparently without result. Peter and John - when they left the Temple were surrounded by sick people, and one was healed. That is the second sounding: healing was part of the earliest Christian witness, but it was just a part and not at all an absolute.

The third sounding has to do with methodology. Jesus was not a philosopher. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a well reasoned essay on Faith and Health. In fact, we can't find a good, logical argument about the nature of man, or the relationship of body, mind and spirit. What we do find is action. Events not ideas: happenings not theories. And the intelligent man today cannot help himself at this point. We are part of a culture that asks "how and why?" The task of coping with this whole element of the Christian faith then usually is either accepting blindly what is written, or else ignoring it altogether. - Neither of which is very responsible.

What then does Christian FAith have to do with health, and where does this New Testament story lead us?

Man traditionally has been defined in three basic categories: body, mind and spirit. As long ago as ancient Greece this triad of humanity was accepted as the working definition. Everyman is body - a complex mechanism of organs, muscles, nerves, arteries and veins, covered with several layers of skin. Everyman is mind. Here reasoning, remembering, thinking, planning take place. Everyman is spirit. Man has the inate ability to transcend himself - to stand outside his own skin, as it were, and observe his own behavior. Man senses that there is an ultimate and reaches out toward that ultimate.

It's all very neat and helpful and logical. When something is wrong with the body it is basically a matter of mechanics: a physician trained in bodily mechanics can make the needed repairs. When something goes wrong with the mind, another kind of mechanic is called in to do the job. He is called a pychiatrist. In matters of the spirit - the clergyman is ordinarily regarded as the expert, although obviously his tools will differ from his other two collegues.

This, I would suggest, is the operating assumption for most people. And while it is a very neat division it is not necessarily true. The Hebrews of Old Testament days, for instance, would not recognize it. For them, man is a unity - a totality - not just a sum of his separate parts. The New Testament is based on the same premise. If we can talk about the three categories - body, mind and spirit - at all, it must be as a complex meshing of functions, not three separate planes of existence.

Most physicians today know this. Some people know it too, but it has been a long struggle. The three professions involved have jealously guarded their presumed areas of separate authority - and people generally seem to prefer it that way.

Doctors have been slow in admitting that their patient is something more than a machine that needs repairing. Doctors have been slow in acknowledging that their relationship with a patient is a unique and rare thing in today's world, and that they are always in a position to treat the whole man.

Clergymen, too, have naively assumed that their function is to pray at the bedside, and that the physician's only function is to prescribe the proper medication.

But there are very encouraging signs on the horizon. The AMA in recent years has taken new cognizance of the importance of a physican's ability to relate personally to his patient. From the minister's side, it is practically impossible today to earn a theological degree without concentrated work in the field of religion and health. And in this community there is a repartee' between psychiatrists and ministers that is a very rare and good thing.

In any case, I think you and I know and experience our wholeness in many ways once we are freed from the traditional definition of ourselves as three separate, independent parts. We have experienced, for instance, the effect a bad headache has on our ability to think. We know that our emotions are very much affected by our physical health. Likewise we know ourselves well enough to perceive our ability to work up a good set of physical symptoms when we are anxious, worried or "up tight". And everyone of us has experienced the mental and spiritual relief, the real ministry, that happens when we know ourselves to be in the hands of a physician who cares about us as a whole person.

The issue of Faith - Healing, however, is one that is battered by the extremes. On the one hand the Christian Scientists tell us that disease is unreal, the product of faulty and impure thinking: that healing is a process of overcoming these unfortunate thought-habits, and that there is no reality at all to physical infirmity.

On the other hand the Pentecostals are telling us that healing is so much a part of religion that if we pray hard and fervently enough we will be possessed by the Spirit and cleansed of our disease. Sometimes it works: and yet the theological implications leave one with a very mechanical God - who may be convinced to intervene here and there as a direct response to the fervor of a man's requests.

Most of us can't accept that: and while we respect the sincerity of those who do, and are impressed when it works, we remain simply unconvinced that this deals honestly with either the New Testament or the reality of life as we experience it.

What, then, does Christian FAith have to do with health? First, and basically, we know that physical health, wholeness, is God's will for us. We know that healing

was of prime importance to Jesus and his disciples. We know that Christian mission includes a very deep sensitivity to human suffering, and we know that the power of God which worked through men like Peter and John is still very much at work in the world.

I would suggest to you that if there are holy places in our community, as opposed to secular places, they are not just the sanctuaries, but the hospitals, the operating rooms and labs and blood banks and doctors offices all over this town. I would suggest to you that miracles are performed in these buildings everyday: that the exquisite skill of the surgeon is a channel for the healing power of God: that the Holy Spirit is gloriously at work in modern medicine - in the same way that he worked through those first faithful disciples.

I would suggest that our faith demands a commitment in this area: that physical health and the necessary medical services - for all people - are goals that rank highly for a Christian, and that they stand alone. In the past we have sometimes explained expenditures of mission dollars for health services as a method of introducing men to Jesus Christ. Well, that may happen, but my reading of the New Testament leads me to feel that health is an end in and of itself, and that God cares for more about the well being of a sick child than he does about the religious persuasion of his parents.

Christian FAith demands that we perceive man in his wholeness, no longer as three independent spheres of existence. It means, personally, a recognition that within us - body, mind and spirit are not separate: that God is concerned about our totality; that our prayers to him for healing are always appropriate: and that our thanksgiving is merited wherever healing happens.

I think, most importantly, that Christian FAith is a way through all of life's experiences - including illness. One commentator says it this way: "Christianity does not promise perfect health. What it does promise is this: with that confidence in the Source of Life, that openness toward God that eliminates fear and frenzy and breaks through the barriers of distrust and doubt, a man will have at his disposal God's power and God's weapons and all the purity that comes from Him to meet the

enemy and triumph over it." [I.B. Acts 3:1-16 Exposition]

That is, because of Jesus Christ we can trust God. We can know that whatever is in store for us we do not work alone. Because of Jesus Christ we may know that God can use whatever happens to us in a mysterious way for his glory. Best of all - he goes with us - in sickness and in health. Christian Faith is an "enabler" - by which we can be of good cheer, by which we can have courage, by which we may live confidently.

You see, in the final analysis, physical illness, mental illness, spiritual illness, are the marks of our mortality. It is a reminder that the real enemy is death. We know that - everyone of us - deep, down inside, and the older we get the more that lump of knowledge tightens within us.

The relationship of Faith to Health is the good news of the Gospel. The final enemy - about which illness speaks - is defeated. We need not fear. Death no longer has dominion over us, and because of that illness too has been stripped of its terrible threat. That, finally, is what Christianity is about.

Centuries before Christ a poet said it beautifully -

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff,
They comfort me."

Amen

Almighty God we give thanks for bodies which reflect the magnificence of your creation. We give thanks for pain which warns us that something is wrong. We give thanks for those who minister to us where we are ill. But most of all we give thanks for the power of your love which restores our humanity and supports us in sickness and in health. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.